DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 312 613 CS 009 823

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TITLE Reflections on Whole Language, Whole Word, and Phonics
PUB DATE Dec 89
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Reading; *Phonics; Primary Education; Reading Attitudes; Reading Comprehension; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Teachers; Sight Method
IDENTIFIERS *Educational Issues; *Whole Language Approach

ABSTRACT

The reading profession's current emphasis on whole language may have helped to raise the recurring debate between meaning-based (whole language) and phonics-based (code emphasis) approaches to teaching reading. As some researchers have linked whole language with whole word, phonics advocates have come forth with renewed vigor to offer a series of claims and counter claims. What has failed to occur in this debate is any movement away from the simplistic claims for improving reading instruction. Some teachers have already discovered ways to combine the strengths of several approaches to reading. Teachers who remain committed to their primary mission of developing literacy among their students will not get caught up in the power struggle between phonics and whole language. They will continue to apply what works--no matter what those in the reading profession choose to call it. (NKA)

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Reflections on Whole Language, Whole Word, and Phonics

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Reflections on Whole Language, Whole Word, and Phonics

When Mosenthal (1989) noted that the whole language approach put teachers between a rock and a hard place, he further stimulated my thinking on what may be an even larger issue for the reading profession. I've watched whole language become a buzz word and possibly create what may be a "new" storm that focuses on a recurring theme in reading.

The reading profession seems to be especially susceptible to the swing of the pendulum. For several years, we concentrated on skills. Then, a shift focused our attention on a more unified approach to reading which sustained momentum as the favorite of some professionals. Skills instruction became suspect. There was little fusing of old with new. Instead, the old was rejected, the new tried, and the profession split. The storm has raged and will continue to do so until something new comes along and the pendulum swings once again. There are, of course, professionals who weather the storm. Some don't believe the new is all its advocates claim or that the old is as bad as the critics decree. Others know that the old and the new have both strengths and limitations.

The current emphasis on whole language may have helped to raise the recurring debate between meaning-based (whole language) and phonics-based (code emphasis) approaches to teaching reading (Morris, 1989). In essence, the debate becomes a chasm between whole word and phonics. Chall (1982, p. 532) has noted a "resemblance of the 'whole language' approach to the 'whole-word,' 'sight,' and 'thought' approaches from the 1920s through the late

1960s." By linking whole language with whole word, Chall has intentionally or unintentionally resurrected the old issue of meaning-emphasis approach versus code-emphasis approach. As she says, "we have a tendency to look for global, charismatic, single solutions to very serious problems" (Chall, 1989, p. 532). As whole word is increasingly tied to whole language, the phonics advocates come forth with renewed vigor to offer a series of claims and counter claims. If the phonics advocates have been in a defensive posture for several years, the whole language movement has offered a way for phonics supporters to shift from a defensive to an offensive posture. The battle lines are being drawn once again. The recent "debate" between Carbo and Chall serves as evidence. Carbo (1988) writes an article titled "Debunking the Great Phonics Myth." Chall's response, invited by the editor of Phi Delta Kappan, argues that Carbo's attempts to debunk the great phonics myth have failed.

Despite the claims of both authors, what has failed to occur in this debate is any movement away from the simplistic claims for improving reading instruction. The gathering storm in reading is brought about, in part, by criticisms against phonics and characterizations of whole-language instruction as "the current meaning-emphasis approach" (Chall 1989, p. 522). Is there any middle-ground in these positions? For proponents of whole language (e.g., Shanklin and Rhodes, 1989, p. 59) who see it "gaining a foothold in schools over the past five years" and helping students "become enthusiastic readers and writers" when "compared to traditional skill-based instruction," there may not seem to be any middle ground. Goodman (1989) argues that whole language is a philosophy; not

a curriculum that needs to be patched with skills instruction. Heymsfeld (1989), however, argues that both whole language and skill-based instruction have strengths, and teachers should use a combined approach. Some teachers have already discovered ways to combine the strengths of several approaches; moreover, it was being done before the term "whole language" came into prominence.

Both phonics and whole language may be characterized as jargon. Whole language is a current buzz word. Phonics always seems to be around in one form or another. The power struggle begins when whole language is linked with whole word. Then the old debate between whole word and phonics is resurrected. Bader (1989, p. 629) quotes a president of a reading association who noted that "getting other people to use your terms is an indication of power." I've seen words like schema and psycholinguistics help create those who are "in" and by deduction, those who are "out." Will the same be true for whole language? As Gough (1989, p. 498) has observed in a related matter: "two camps of zealots...have jumped into the fray without even bothering to hear both sides of the debate. Each camp has drawn its wagons into a circle and refused to budge. In such standoffs, there are no winners. And the children are the losers."

There is a middle ground which can be found by teachers who seek it. Such teachers will not get caught up in the power struggle, but will instead, remain committed to their primary mission: developing literacy among their students. In doing so, they will continue to apply what works -- regardless of what we in the reading profession choose to call it.

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